

FINDINGS: Violations of freedom of religion or belief continue in Venezuela. These violations include: government rhetoric, and in some cases government actions, against the Jewish and Catholic communities and certain Protestant groups; virulent anti-Semitic statements by President Hugo Chavez, senior government officials, state media, and pro-Chavez media; societal attacks on Jewish and Catholic institutions and Catholic leaders and the Venezuelan government's failure to investigate or hold accountable the perpetrators of these attacks; and the potential negative impact of new laws on religious communities.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Venezuela on its Watch List in 2010. In 2009, the Commission placed Venezuela on its Watch List for the first time.

Since 1998, the country has witnessed a steady increase in government rhetoric, and in some cases government actions, directed against the Venezuelan Jewish and Catholic communities and Protestant groups supported by U.S.-based counterparts. These developments occurred against a backdrop of efforts by President Hugo Chavez to extend his political control over government institutions, the economy, and society; his backtracking on democracy; and the imposition of his state-run programs on "Bolivarian socialist" doctrine. While there are no official restrictions on religious practice, actions by President Chavez and other government officials have created an environment in which Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions are at risk of attack. Furthermore, the Venezuelan government has failed to take adequate measures to bring to justice perpetrators of attacks on Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: The U.S. government should increase its efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief in Venezuela, but this must be done in a way so as not to put religious communities in danger, considering the poor state of relations between the two

countries and President Chavez's efforts to stand in opposition to the United States. The U.S. government should continue its policy of speaking out against attacks on religious leaders and institutions as they occur. The U.S. government should also work with countries such as Spain and Brazil that may have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage it to end its anti-Semitic statements; fully investigate attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders; and hold perpetrators accountable. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy towards Venezuela can be found in the 2010 Annual Report chapter on Venezuela.